West Coast Story

By George Nicholson

WRECKS, BATTLES SCARRED the SHORE

THE WEST COAST of Vancouver Island between Port Renfrew and Pachena Point offers no shelter whatever for ships, big or small, in any weather. Its only indentations, a few open bays, are all exposed to winds from every direction. Is it any wonder, then, that over 30 major shipwrecks occurred there, one for every mile of shoreline. Scores of fishboats and other small craft—the actual number will never be known have also been lost in the same locality.

The majority of wrecks occurred before there were any lighthouses on this part of the coast. Now it has two, at Carmanah Point, established in 1891, and Pachena Point, established in 1907. Carmanah is an adoptation by early navigators, and adopted by Admiralty surveyors, of the name of the village (quo-ma-doa) situated under the bluff and once inhabited by a sub-band, now nearly extinct, of the once numerous and fierce Nitinat tribe. Three miles to the east is Bonilla Point.

DEADLY POINT

Thirteen of the wrecks, all sailing vessels, occurred in this vicinity, the majority on or near Bonilla Point. The Cyrus on Dec. 23, 1858; William Tell, Dec. 22, 1869; Gem of the Ocean, August, 1870; Revere, Sept. 9, 1883; Lizzie Marshall, Feb. 22, 1884; Belvedere, Nov. 29, 1886; Duchess of Argyle, Oct. 11, 1887; Dare, Dec. 23, 1890; Dart, April, 1895; Puritan, 1896; Wempe Bros., Oct. 28, 1903, and the Fawn, in October, 1905.

Flowing into the sea about four miles to the east of Bonilla Point is Walbran River, named after Captain John T. Walbran, author of the book "British Columbia Coast Names," from the pages of which much of the information contained in this series, Story of the Coast, was obtained.

Captain Walbran was educated at Ripon Grammar School, Yorkshire, and afterwards, for sea-service in HM school-frigate Conway; became a master mariner in 1881 and in 1890 joined the Canadian Pacific Navigation Company as master of the Danube.

FINE REFERENCE

He supervised the building, at Paisley, Scotland, of the steamer Quadra, destined to be one of the best-known ships that ever sailed British Columbia waters. He commanded her on the passage out (1891) via the Horn, and had charge of her in the lighthouse, buoy and fisheries service until 1908.

His book, published by Ottawa in 1909 for the Geographic Board of Canada and long since out of circulation, is still considered the standard book of reference on this subject. My copy, autographed by the author, came from the personal library of the late James Dunsmuir.

Port Renfrew, better known to mariners as Port San Juan, is 12 miles east of Bonilla Point, therefore well inside the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Clo-oose, the Indian name meaning a safe landing, is the only settlement between Port Renfrew and Barkley Sound. It once had a population of 200, but since its only industry, a cannery on nearby Nitinat Lake, ceased operations 30 years ago, one by one the residents have drifted away and now there are only a score left.

Freight for Clo-oose (and passengers also) has to be ferried from steamer to beach by Indians in canoes. This is a tricky operation, and in the days of the Princess Maquinna, was one of the highlights for her passengers making the round trip. She carried 200.

Unless it was flat calm, which was seldom, the Maquinna never dropped anchor. Instead, her captain would ease the ship in as close as he dared, then turn her bow-on to the seas and keep her under way. This was to prevent her from rolling while the canoes were being loaded from the open freight doors, almost at water level. Pitching didn't matter, but one good roll would not only flood the hold, but smash any canoe alongside. Head on, the canoes can ride the swells with comparative safety, if properly handled.

MAGIC PADDLES

Tourists marveled at the way such frail craft were manipulated; usually by one Indian (often a klutchman) with a short paddle, and squatting in the stern, and a younger Indian catching the freight as it was tossed from the ship; or in the case of a passenger, when he (or she) jumped.

Watching the heavily-laden canoes go ashore was just as exciting, especially as they neared the beach, where, regardless of how smooth the sea appeared to be, the swells always broke. More so when it was really rough, and a ducking for someone and wet freight usually resulted.

Wrecked near Clo-oose were the sailing ships William, in 1854; Continental, 1860; Woodrich, 1888, and the Persian in 1891. After the turn of the century, the schooner Skagit, with the loss of two lives in 1906; the steamer Santa Rita on Feb. 14, 1923, with the loss of one crew member, and the schooner Rita Papita on Jan. 16, 1927.

Nitinat Lake is joined to the ocean by a short tidal waterway a mile west of Clo-oose. The Nitinats (Nittinahts or Dittinahts) were a once powerful tribe with whom it did not do to be off ones' guard. They had a high reputation as hunters, whalers, fisheres and warriors. Whyack, at the seaward entrance tothe lake, was (and still is for the few that are left) their principal village. Because of frequent raids made by the Makah Indians from Neah Bay, it was once well fortified.

For years the Nitinats fueded with the Ohiats from Barkley Sound. Back in 1882, the Cox sisters, daughters of the Cape Beale lighthouse keeper, when travelling back and forth from school at Victoria, because there was no other means of transportation several times made the journey by canoe. On one occasion their host and navigator was Gaelic Dick, an Ohiat from Banfield, who, with his wife, was returning from hop picking in the U.S. The journey occupied several days, requiring them to camp each night on shore.

WICKED FRIENDS

The only night the girls were afraid was when camped on the beach at the mouth of the Nitinat River. Here, Dick warned them to be perfectly quiet, and, if any Indians should come near, not to show their faces. "Delate mesthchie tillicum" (meaning very wicked friends), he kept repeating.

The girls had little sleep that night. Neither did Dick, who admitted that he slept with one eye open. They didn't bother about breakfast and were thankful to be on their way again as the Indian quietly slid the canoe into the water long before dawn. Dick then told them that his wife was a Nitinat and he didn't even trust her. He had taken her without the chief's consent, and also feared that they might kill them all if they knew he was carrying white people in his canoe. They had killed a friend of his for doing that very same thing, he said.

Other experiences of the Cox sisters, now Mrs. Frances Morrison and Mrs. P. Haslam, both residing at the Aged Women's Home on McClure Street, Victoria, were referred to in a previous article of this series.

No vessel larger than a medium-sized tugboat or fish-packer can cross the Nitinat bar, and then only if the captain is thoroughly familiar with it. Few skippers even try. More boats have been capsized in the attempt, some with considerable loss of life, than at any other passage of its kind on the B.C. coast.

NEVER A LOSS

Veteran tugboat master Fred McFarlane, port captain for Island Tug and Barge Co., probably knows more about the bar than any other man. Between 1922 and 1925, with the steam tug J.W.P. (his own vessel), he towed flat rafts out of Nitinat Lake and never lost a log.

Moore and Whittington have a logging camp on the east side of the lake. Supplies are taken in by road, from Cowichan Lake to the head of Nitinat Lake. The logs are brought out in bundle-booms, designed and built specially to negotiate the narrow entrance and stand the rough passage over the bar. From there they are towed to Victoria.

In 1887, the schooner Rustler and Champion were both wrecked on Nitinat bar, and in the following year the steamer Woodside lost her rudder and went ashore a mile to the west. Among the vessels which capsized on the bar, and afterwards sank, were the cabin cruiser Inlet Queen, in 1912, the fishpacker Renfrew in November, 1918, and the Victoria tug Beryl, in 1920.

13 RESCUED

Thirteen persons lost their lives with the sinking of the Renfrew, most of them employees of the Nitinat Lake Cannery, on their way home to Vancouver. The other 13 persons on board owed their lives to the prompt action of the residents of Clo-oose.

Four miles to the west are Tsusiat Falls, which for combined beauty and grandeur, might well be described as the finest natural water cascade on Vancouver Island. They originate in a stream which empties out of a small lake by the same name half a mile inland, and pour over an 80-foot-high cliff, sheer to the beach.

The 100-foot-wide mass of white water is clearly visible from far out at sea and fishermen use this as a landmark to locate their favorite fishing spots. At times when the high tide and heavy swells coincide, a huge breaker will sometimes momentarily almost envelop the falls completely, but they reappear in all their grandeur as the wave recedes.

For years, the remains of an old iron gunboat lay on the rocks near the falls, but she was never identified. In 1896, the steamer Uncle John was wrecked a mile farther west, and the coastal freighter Vesta piled up close by in 1899.

Wrecked in the vicinity of Pachena Point, were the barques Sarah and Laura Pike, in 1891; the steamer Michigan in 1893, near the mouth of a creek subsequently named after her, and the sailing ship Janet Cowan in 1896. Only six of the Janet Cowan's crew were saved. In 1923, the American schooner Robert E. Lewers, outward bound from Puget Sound for Honolulu with lumber, went ashore in the same locality. All hands were lost. All occurred not far from where the passenger steamer Valencia, inbound from San Francisco to Victoria, went ashore on Jan. 23, 1906, when out of 154 persons on board 117 perished.

In March, 1943, the armed Russian supply ship Uzbekistan, went ashore at the mouth of Darling Creek, which is in the same locality. She was bound for Esquimalt to pick up a load of ammunition for Vladivostok. First at the scene was the lighthouse tender Estevan. Observing that the vessel was armed, her captain notified Esquimalt and the navy took charge. Meanwhile, her entire crew, which included several women, reached shore safely. Escorted by naval personnel, all walked the 12-mile trail to Banfield. Broken in two, the ship remained on the rocks for several months, during which time she was looted.

'BONES' REMAIN

At different places along this part of the coast the "bones" of many of the wrecks may still be seen at low tide.

In 1890, a telephone line and a foot trail was built all the way from Victoria to Cape Beale. It followed the shoreline consisted of a single wire strung from tree to tree. Also built at intervals along the line were small cabins, each with a telephone and instructions as to its use printed in several different languages. The cabins also contained medical supplies, blankets, matches and canned foods.

In addition to the regular linesmen, extra men were employed during the winter months to make special patrols; thus the lives of many shipwrecked sailors, who might otherwise have died from exposure or injuries, were saved. When shipwrecks became less frequent, chiefly owing to the introduction of wireless and direction-finding apparatus, the cabins were abandoned. Several, however, are still there.